

Fort Andrew and The War of 1812 Part 1

By JOE SHEA

After President Madison declared war in June of 1812, the state militia was sent to the tip of the Gurnet to reactivate Fort Andrew. They brought with them sufficient guns to defend the entrance to Plymouth Bay, among them several of the largest guns ever to be deployed in the defense of the shipping channels of Plymouth Bay. These 42-pounders were made from used up 32-pounders that were rebored. The "pounder" designation was a measure of the weight of the solid shot the guns could fire. At the end of the Revolutionary War many of the 32-pounders had been so heavily used that they had worn away the inside of the gun barrel to the point that they could no longer use the standard 32-pound projectiles. Some of those guns were made with extra iron to avoid having them explode in service. Engineers rebored the barrels to make them smooth again and developed a new "42 pound" exploding shell that used much less gunpowder. These were the first of a new class of guns known as Columbiads. They were used for coastal defense and were real ship killers.

The cannons at Fort Andrew would have been like the guns one has seen on sailing ships with the small wheels or mounted on iron bases that allowed them to be aimed through an arc that allowed overlapping coverage. Since this was essentially the same fort used in the revolutionary war the guns were tucked in behind the earthen walls of the

fort and open to the sky.

At the beginning of hostilities the embargo along the northeast coast was based on the British catching our ships at sea. Some limited trade frequently ran along the coast, hoping the British would not or could not chase them in the relative shallows and estuaries. In July of 1814, two barges from His Britannic Majesty's Ship *Hogue*, a 74 gun ship, were pursuing an American crew smuggling flour in a small boat bound for Boston. The American crew ran for cover under the guns of Fort Andrew, which promptly fired on the barges. The second shot, at the extreme range of three miles, struck and caused the loss of one of the two barges. There were some allegations that the fort continued to fire a few rounds at the men in the water who had abandoned their barge. No one was hurt and the

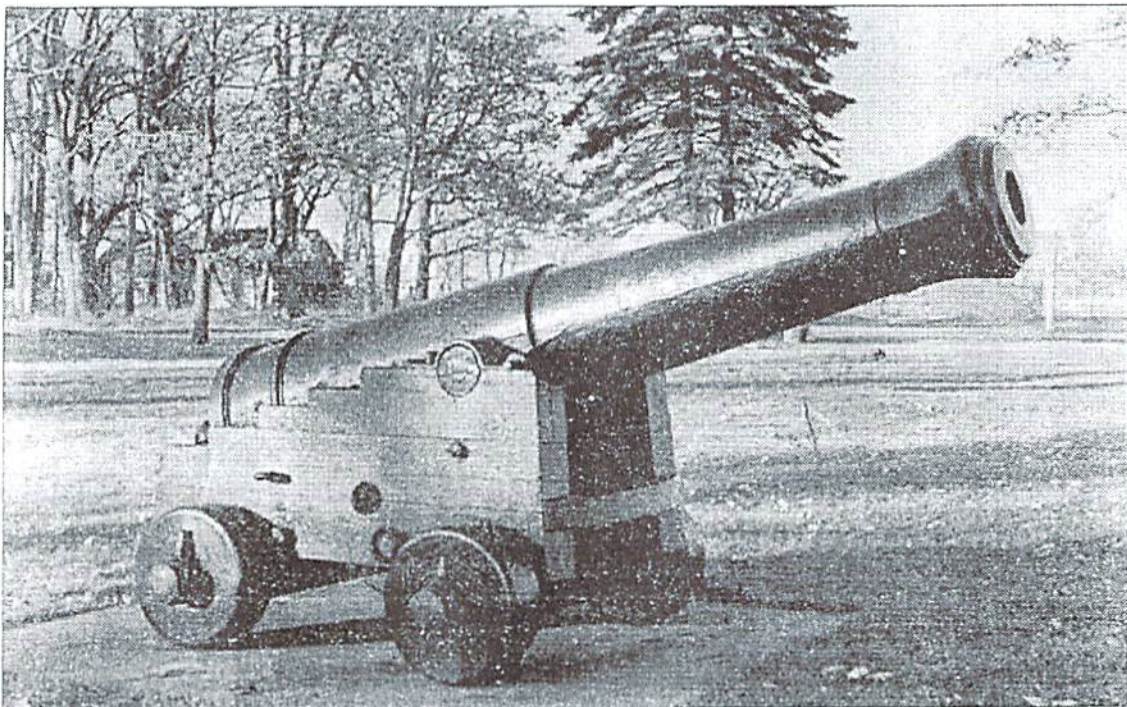
Hogue did not press the issue. The sails, water casks and other usable equipment were stripped off the barge by the Duxbury schooner *Despatch* and brought to port. Later the barge was recovered and towed into Plymouth. In the civilized way some wars were fought the barge was returned to the Royal Navy at their request. Perhaps this was done to mollify the powerful fleet just off-shore.

With the commencement of hostilities the English did not have the manpower or ships to truly seal all the lesser ports. *Hogue* was but one ship, others were *Leander*, 58 guns, *Nymphe*, 38 guns and *Spencer* mounting 74 guns. They were seeking revenge, cruising Massachusetts Bay and the Gulf of Maine hoping to draw out the U.S.S. *Constitution* for a fight on their terms. While on patrol they were seizing local fishing boats as smugglers and capturing such merchant men as dared to run the blockade. Some merchantmen managed to evade capture but a few were taken as prizes of war and sent to Halifax, Nova Scotia. The coverage was initially thin as the Royal Navy was tied up in a war in Europe. That changed and the Royal Army and Navy were then free to focus on the issues in North America. The Royal Navy, having recently beaten the combined fleets of France and Spain, was the most powerful in the world and felt they could strike with impunity. Strike they did. Commerce raids by the Royal Navy inflicted serious damage on coastal communities. In Essex, Connecticut a raid led by the *Hogue* destroyed 27 ships in port and did a lot of damage before slipping away unchallenged.. Wareham.

HISTORY

Mattapoisett and Scituate were attacked and many other coastal towns threatened. Usually the Royal Navy sent in their Marines to burn the local sailing vessels and sometimes would come back and burn parts of the town. The Marines would row ashore in what were then called "barges." Today we would call them large row boats. They had up to 12 rowers and could carry a lot of people or cargo in shallow water. They also had sails and obviously could go where the warship could not. Some barges mounted swivel guns which were very small portable cannons. Once among the moored vessels they would burn them and then attempt to burn the waterfront warehouses and boatyards.

Duxbury felt more protection was needed than Fort Andrew could provide. Once you got past the guns there would be nothing to prevent an attacker from destroying at will any shipping or port facilities in Plymouth Harbor. The Duxbury Town leaders applied to the Massachusetts War Board for more cannon, shot and powder. The head of the War Board, a General Cobb, observed that "it would be a waste of time as the inhabitants would not know what to do with them." Governor Brooks intervened on behalf of the Town and two field pieces (guns with large wheels for towing) and a supply of powder and shot were provided. Plymouth sent three more field pieces and the Town was able to acquire some others. These were deployed primarily into two forts built on the side of the entrance to the Bluefish River.



The cannons at Fort Andrew would have been like the guns one has seen on sailing ships.

Fort Andrew and The War of 1812 Part 2

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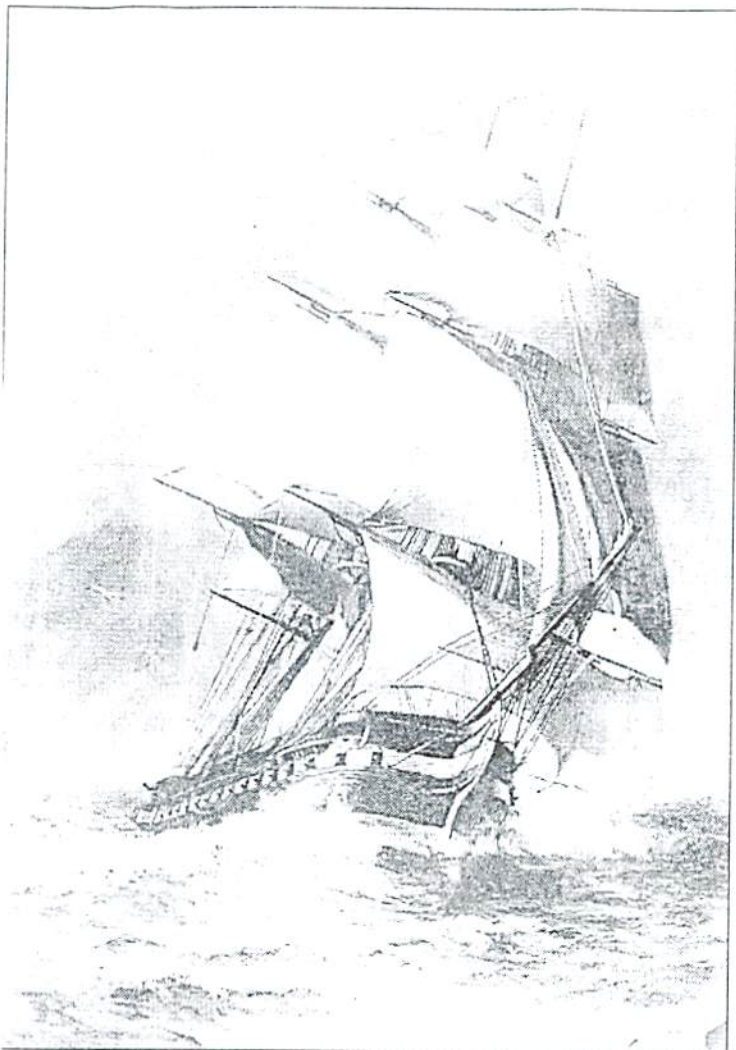
Guns at the Bluefish River

At the end of what is now called Fort Hill Lane the locals built a small fort. It was called the "Upper Fort" and was positioned just east of a house. The fort mounted three six pounders. It was also referred to as Fort Squirt by some local people. This might have had something to do with the comparative firepower of Fort Andrew. To the northeast where the river turns to form a basin was the "Lower Fort." It was situated on a peninsula with a clear field of fire. The Lower Fort mounted two 12-pounders. Between them these two forts could effectively seal off the Bluefish River basin from marauders. If you were to go along King Caesar road and look across the mouth of the Bluefish you could see that the guns would have provided solid coverage for the shipping just up river.

Up the river behind the protection of these guns along the Bluefish the local fleet was secreted. It was made up of two ships, one brig and six schooners. The distinction in the labeling of ships was important to understand the capability and size of the vessels. Today we would incorrectly call them all ships. The townspeople, feeling that Fort Andrew and the Upper and Lower Forts were not enough, mounted additional guns on wharves and piers along the waterfront. They stretched from the Sampson pier, mounting two guns, on Standish Street to at least the vicinity of the Lot Hunt pier, mounting one gun, at the foot of Freeman Place. The Duxbury waterfront would have been a formidable target with strong defenses. To be completely ready teams of rowers patrolled the harbor at night to thwart a night raid. They were to sound the alarm which would then be passed along by other means. By design an alarm was sounded one evening though no one would take responsibility. The alarm worked well and men responded from all over town as if an electrical signal had been sent. Burning barrels of pitch, noisemakers and ringing church bells summoned the militia. Inhabitants of neighboring towns poured in to offer assistance. History never revealed the true reason for the alarm but all were satisfied that sufficient force would rush to the defense of the waterfront when called.

Last gun on the Bluefish River

The Powder Point School, formerly at the sharp bend of King Caesar Road near Weston Road, was a three story large wooden structure that was no longer needed as a school. It was used for a while as a summer hotel but some would argue found its highest and best use as a home for "Sailors, Marines and others, employed in the Naval service of the United States, disabled by wounds, sickness, old age or otherwise without regard to their place or enlistment." On July 27, 1931 the National Sailors Home was dedicated by a large contingent of national and local figures. Entertainment was provided by the United States Marine Corps Band. There were only a few National Sailors Homes in the country and each of them was marked with the installation of a 24 pounder smoothbore cannon (gun) from the *USS Constitution*. This gun was on loan from the Navy but displayed as a mark of respect for the Navy veterans in residence. The gun was one of a total of 62 provided for *Constitution*. The Frigate was rated at 42 guns but various configurations would have as many as 62 aboard. If you visit the ship today you will quickly determine that less than 42 guns are aboard. That is for safety and to open the area up to the public.



The USS Constitution loaned a gun to the Sailors' Home on
ing Caesar Road.

The National Sailors Home gun was mounted on the front lawn between the main building and the water. It was set on a concrete pad and aimed at the mouth of the Bluefish River. The gun barrel was mounted on a wooden carriage which in turn was mounted on four non pivoting steel wheels. The metal work and gun barrel were painted

black and gun was generally in good condition. The steel wheels are very typical of the installations aboard ship. This gun, being a 24 pounder, was not the largest aboard the *Constitution*, that honor went to the 32 pounder carronades which were better at close in fighting. The 24 pounder was the long range gun.

There it stood. The last gun along the Bluefish River. It had been manufactured for *Constitution* and almost certainly saw action during the war of 1812. It may well have fought the Barbary Pirates and shelled the shores of Tripoli. In the confrontation and defeat of *Guerriere* a 38 gun British warship in August of 1812 *Constitution* earned the name *Old Ironsides*. The gun would have been part of that fight.

Many current residents recall the gun. Some report climbing on it or leaning against it. Some had not realized it was no longer there. Unlike some other guns in town this one is back in the inventory of the U.S. Navy and the USS Constitution. The National Sailors Home which by now had merged with the Sailors Snug Harbor was down to 9 residents by 1970. They were relocated and the decision was made to close the building in 1971. The building was torn down shortly after. When the Sailors Home was closed the gun was returned to inventory and is back in Boston if not onboard *Constitution*.

No gun along the Bluefish was ever fired in defense of Duxbury while installed here.